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ABSTRACT

This supplementary lesson to the "We the People...The Citizen and the Constitution" lessons looks at the legacy of George Washington, an influential leader in the creation of the United States. Upon completion of this lesson students should be able to evaluate, take, and defend a position on the contributions of the "Father of His Country" to the nation's traditions of constitutional government and citizenship. Background information, lesson activities, additional readings, and web-site resources are included. (MM)

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ED 432 487

We the People

THE CITIZEN AND THE CONSTITUTION

What Was George Washington's Legacy to American Constitutionalism and Citizenship?

SO 029 722

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Washington At Princeton

How is George Washington's heroic stature shown in this 1857 engraving of his military victory at Princeton on January 3rd, 1777?

A Note to Teachers: The 200th anniversary of George Washington's death in 1799 provides an appropriate opportunity to examine once again his contributions to American constitutionalism and citizenship. To this end, the Center for Civic Education has collaborated with the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association to produce this supplement to ***We the People...The Citizen and the Constitution.*** It should be studied after students have covered the material in Lessons 1 through 20. The competitive hearings for 1998-1999 will include one or more questions on Washington's place in the nation's constitutional legacy.

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What Was George Washington's Legacy to American Constitutionalism and Citizenship?

Purpose of Lesson

This lesson looks at the legacy of George Washington, perhaps the most influential leader in the creation of the American nation. Through his achievements as commander-in-chief during the Revolution, in support of the drafting and ratification of the Constitution, and as first president, Washington was instrumental in transforming the ideals of the Revolution into reality. His career as soldier, revolutionary, constitution-maker, and chief executive of a new nation demanded a range of skills and talents with few precedents in history.

When you have completed this lesson, you will be able to evaluate, take, and defend a position on the contributions of the "Father of His Country" to the nation's traditions of constitutional government and citizenship.

Who was George Washington?

George Washington (1732-1799) was born and grew up in rural Virginia, at a time when it was a royal colony with British traditions of government by aristocracy and an economy based on growing and exporting tobacco. His father's early death interrupted George's formal education. He became a professional surveyor in his late teens but soon thereafter turned to military service as a way to realize his ambitions. As a soldier he demonstrated enough courage and decisiveness to become the commander of the Virginia troops that defended the state's western frontier during the French and Indian War. He also established himself as a successful tobacco planter at the family plantation, Mount Vernon, married Martha Dandridge Custis, and won election to the Virginia House of Burgesses.

Washington had nothing to gain from the American Revolution, at least in a material sense. He had achieved both wealth and fame as a British subject in colonial Virginia. Yet he was among the first to raise the possibility of armed resistance and accepted command of the Continental Army. He served for the eight and a half years of the Revolution without pay. Though his army was inexperienced, often outnumbered, and poorly supplied, Washington was able to avoid defeat, wear down the British forces, and eventually achieve victory. With independence secured in 1783 by a peace treaty with Britain, Washington appeared before Congress and publicly resigned his military position, returning to Mount Vernon a private citizen of the new nation. His plantation had suffered greatly during his absence and the war.

In 1787 Washington's concerns about the disintegration of the nation prompted him to serve as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. He presided over the convention, and his support was key to ratification of the newly proposed Constitution. In 1789, Washington was inaugurated first president of the United States. He served two terms, guiding the new government through the organization of the executive branch, founding the nation's capital, Washington, D.C., opening the west for settlement, and establishing precedents that have influenced the conduct of succeeding presidents ever since. He left the presidency in 1797, following the election of John Adams, and again returned to Mount Vernon. Washington briefly returned to public life when President Adams asked him to take command of the army in anticipation of possible war with France. He died at Mount Vernon in December 1799.

How did Washington establish the principle that the military is subordinate to civilian government?

In assessing Washington's career, Thomas Jefferson emphasized the importance of the rule of law when he wrote that Washington had earned "ever[lasting remembrance" by "obeying the laws through the whole of his career, civil and military, of which the history of the world furnishes no other example." As commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, Washington never lost sight of the fact that his authority came from Congress, and that the purpose of the army was to carry out the will of the civil government. Even when Congress voted Washington broad-reaching emergency powers late in 1776, he was careful not to exceed the bounds of his legal authority.

When his officers were angry late in the war because Congress had not paid them as promised, he refused to support their plan to march on Congress. Instead he confronted the officers planning this action, known as the Newburgh Conspiracy. Washington won their allegiance when he made an example of his own self-sacrifice. Eyewitness accounts relate that Washington used his failing eyesight as the example, saying "Gentlemen, you will permit me to don my spectacles, for I have grown not only gray but nearly blind in the service of my country" when he was unable to read a document.

What important principle was Washington acknowledging when he resigned his commission at the end of the Revolution?

The most important public example occurred at the end of the Revolution, when Washington returned his commission—the symbol of his authority—to Congress. At the time he took this step, his popularity and power over the army might have permitted him to seize control of the government, as victorious generals had done before and have often done since. Julius Caesar in ancient Rome, Oliver Cromwell in England, and Napoleon Bonaparte in France were all successful military leaders who found the temptation of political power irresistible. Washington so strongly established the precept that the military serves the people of the nation and their civilian government that there has never been a threat to the American government from its own military.

What role did Washington play in the drafting and ratification of the Constitution?

Many of the Founders gave their first loyalty to their home states. From the very beginning of the Revolution, however, Washington was a nationalist. His country was America, not Virginia, and what America could become through a strong union of the states. Later, as president, he would declare that Americans as "citizens by birth or choice...must always exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local discriminations."

Convinced of the need for a strong national government, Washington agreed to attend the Constitutional Convention. He spoke rarely during debates, in part because he was the presiding officer. The Convention delegates assumed that Washington would also become the first president chosen under the new Constitution, and this encouraged them to propose strong, wide-ranging powers for the executive. The shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation had convinced the delegates that a weak executive was a mistake. They knew that many Americans were distrustful of a strong executive, but, as one delegate observed, "the powers to be given to a president [were shaped] by opinions of Washington's virtues."

Washington did not participate in the public debates over ratification, although his support was widely known and had a strong influence. Privately he argued for ratification, urgently explaining to Anti-Federalist Patrick Henry that "it is the best constitution that can be obtained...and...this, or a dissolution of the union awaits our choice." Anticipating the outcome of the struggle over ratification, he wrote to Lafayette: "A few short

weeks will determine the political fate of America for the present generation and probably produce no small influence on the happiness of society through a long succession of ages to come."

Persuaded that his election would help cement support for the new government, Washington reluctantly agreed to serve as the nation's first president. He likened his feelings on once again taking up the burdens of public service to "those of a culprit who is going to the place of his execution."

How did Washington's administration shape the institution of the executive branch?

Constitutions do not become real without the institutions necessary to implement them. It fell primarily to Washington to give flesh and blood to the executive branch and the national government generally during their first, critical years. As president, Washington demonstrated the value of a strong executive in the hands of a trustworthy person. He stayed within the bounds of presidential authority outlined by the Constitution and the acts of the First Congress organizing the executive branch. For example, Washington conscientiously sought the "advice and consent" of the Senate in making appointments to office and in executing treaties with foreign governments, as the Constitution required. At the same time, the Senate's refusal to respond immediately to Washington's consultations helped to establish that body's right to both give and withhold its advice and consent.

In filling the many offices created by the new government, Washington avoided making appointments on the basis of social standing, heritage, or friendship. His appointments advanced the idea that the best-qualified people should be tapped for office. He proved a good judge of talent, selfless in advancing such promising younger men as Hamilton and Jefferson. He understood his own limitations and was not reluctant to rely upon the counsel of others. Washington also began the custom of consulting with his principal department heads as a group, which practice led eventually to the creation of the cabinet, an important feature of American government to this day.

By the time Washington retired from the presidency in 1797, he had established that the power of the president was vested in the office, not in the individual who held the office. He attended the inauguration of his successor, John Adams, and insisted on walking behind him at the close of the inaugural ceremonies, thus demonstrating the peaceful transfer of power under the new Constitution.

Why was Washington sometimes referred to as "Our Cincinnatus?" In what ways does his career embody the classical republican ideal of civic virtue?

How did Washington's actions establish the authority of the presidency?

Within the bounds of the Constitution, Washington's vigorous policies established the president as an energetic leader, not a ceremonial figurehead. He required subordinates to seek his approval for their actions, and accepted personal responsibility for their conduct. While he consulted with the Senate on appointments, he insisted that the president alone had the authority to fire an appointee, guaranteeing the president's control of every member of the executive branch. Although Washington employed the president's constitutional power of the veto only twice, he asserted the president's right to reject legislation with which he disagreed.

It was during Washington's presidency that the idea of implied powers in the "necessary and proper" clause of the Constitution was first invoked to justify his signing the law creating the first national bank. As commander-in-chief, Washington called out the militia to put down the Whiskey Rebellion in 1794. He took a strong hand in foreign policy, prudently resisting British and French threats to American interests and at the same time keeping the young nation out of the European war.

How did Washington influence the development of political parties?

In his Farewell Address Washington warned against the danger of party and faction. He believed in the virtues of nonpartisan government, in which patriotic citizens of different views would be willing to serve together. Washington's great stature as a national hero and his willingness to serve for two terms bridged strong regional differences, and gave the new government time to take root before party factions could become divisive.

At the same time, however, Washington's belief in a strong executive and his nationalist sentiments inclined him to favor Hamilton's policies over Jefferson's. His warnings against party and faction to the contrary, he was in many respects the country's first Federalist president.

Critical Thinking Exercise

HOW AMERICANS JUDGE THEIR POLITICAL LEADERS

Work individually or with other students to develop a list of criteria by which Americans today judge their political leaders. You may want to consult the work of presidential historians and political scientists such as Stephen Ambrose, Michael Beschloss, Robert Caro, Doris Kearns Goodwin, David McCullough, Forrest McDonald, James Pfiffner, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

When you finish your list of criteria, interview parents, neighbors, and students at your school to gather information about how some Americans today view the influence and legacy of George Washington as our first president.

Based on your findings, to what extent do you believe the examples of Washington and other Founders are relevant to the criteria by which we judge presidents today?

How did Washington reconcile being a slaveholder with his leadership of a nation dedicated to freedom for all?

George Washington was a leader of a revolution that was one of history's greatest advances for individual liberty. Yet throughout his life, he denied liberty to others as a slaveholder and gained wealth from their labor. Washington accepted the legality of slavery and the property rights of slaveholders. He took steps to prevent some of his own slaves from running away to freedom when travelling to northern states. Realizing that the issue of abolition could well divide the young republic, he never made a public statement in opposition to slavery.

Nevertheless, Washington's private correspondence shows that he had come to reject slavery, both for the human suffering it caused and on principle. His doubts about slavery seem to date from the time of the Revolution when he stopped selling or purchasing Africans. He later wrote, "I am principled against this kind of traffic in the human species." He came to see slavery itself as an immoral, if not illegal, institution. "There is not a living being who wishes [its abolition] more sincerely than I do." In the will he drafted in 1799, he provided for his slaves to be freed after his and Martha's death, and set up a fund to care for those who were elderly or infirm.

Reviewing and Using the Lesson

1. As an individual or group essay assignment: if you were elected the first president of the United States, how would you shape the office of president under Article II of the Constitution? How might your presidency be different from that of Washington's?
2. As a class, organize a debate of the resolution: "Presidents act as they do today because Washington set such a strong example."
3. Is Washington a realistic model by which to judge American presidents in today's world?
4. Is it possible for a revolutionary to also be a framer of a nation's constitution and its first executive? What advantages might there be for the same person filling these different roles. What difficulties might there be?
5. How might the institution of the presidency been shaped differently had Washington's views been closer to those of Thomas Jefferson than to those of Alexander Hamilton?
6. Washington believed that the "general diffusion of knowledge," especially through education, would work against the passion of party differences. Do you agree? Explain your position.
7. How might Washington have reconciled being a slaveholder and a leader of a nation dedicated to freedom for all?
8. What role do you think moral judgments should play in the study of history? To what extent are we justified in making judgments about previous generations?
9. To what extent do you believe the actions of particular individuals can shape the course of history?
10. Biography continues to be the most popular form of history. What value do you see in seeking to understand the past through the studies of individual lives?

For additional reading:

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Alden, John R. *George Washington: A Biography* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).
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Flexner, James T. *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1974)
"George Washington," *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
Hirschfeld, Fritz. *George Washington and Slavery* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997).
Mullin, Gerald W. *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance and Rebellion in Eighteenth Century Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Web sites:

www.mountvernon.org
The home page of Mount Vernon, with information about George and Martha Washington and their lives at Mount Vernon.

www.gwashington1999.org
A new site, with information and news on the 1999 George Washington Bicentennial.

www.virginia.edu/gwpapers/home.html
The home page of the Papers of George Washington project, with essays on all aspects of Washington's life.

www.civiced.org
The home page of the Center for Civic Education with information about its programs and publications.

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html
The Library of Congress site, with 8,000 pages of original George Washington documents accessible on the internet.

This supplement commemorating the bicentennial of George Washington's death is cosponsored by the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association and the Center for Civic Education.

The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association was created in 1853 to preserve George Washington's home as a public trust, and welcomes visitors every day of the year. The Association is a private, nonprofit organization that operates without federal or state funding. For more information, contact the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, Mount Vernon, VA 22121; phone: 1-703-780-2000; e-mail: mvinfo@mountvernon.org; website: www.mountvernon.org.

The Center for Civic Education is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational corporation dedicated to fostering the development of informed, responsible participation in civic life by citizens committed to the values and principles fundamental to American constitutional democracy. The Center specializes in civic/citizenship education, law-related education, and international education exchange programs for developing democracies. For additional information on the Center's programs and curricula, contact the Center for Civic Education, 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302-1467; phone: 1-800-350-4223; Fax 1-818-591-9330; e-mail: center4civ@aol.com; website: www.civiced.org.

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